

General Issue Disclaimer-y thing: Harry Potter is not mine. I was heartbroken when my lawyer informed me of this, but dem's da breaks. Harry Potter's friends aren't mine, nor are Hogwarts, wands, magic, Diagon Alley, Hogsmead, Tom Marvolo Riddle—known aliases include Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort, You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and I-Have-More-Hyphens-In-My-Name-Than-The-Boy-Who-Will-Not-Die...

Author pauses to reflect: *Sigh*. I don't own anything recognizable from the books. All the people in this story are not real people or meant to resemble any person living, dead, fictitious, or other. Any resemblance to any actual person living, dead, fictitious, imagined, hallucinated, or other is purely coincidental. References to actual people living, dead, fictitious, imagined, hallucinated, or other do not actually reference a person living, dead, etc., but rather a literary construct that happens to bear a purely coincidental resemblance to said person that is living, dead, etc.

I do lay claim to Allie and a dementor named Bob, though I stand to make no profits on them. If I did stand to make a profit you would not be reading it here. So, to quote Chris de Burgh, "Don't pay the Ferryman."

In reference to the time line I did shift things a decade so Philosopher's Stone takes place in Y2K. I hope this preemptive warning helps.

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
T. S. Eliot "little Gidding" (5) Four Quarters, 1945

Safe House Derra IV
Location: CLASSIFIED-TOP SECRET
November 25, 2021—08:42zulu
6,338 days since beginning of the Second Voldemort War
4,772 days after Disclosure.

"We lost James."

Harry looked up from the small desk in the equally small room that was nominally 'his'. Given the numbers of their people looking for shelter and the increasing scarcity of safe-houses the fact that he

had a room to himself said quite a lot about how most of his allies felt about him...although Harry frequently wondered if what they were saying was that they respected him or that he'd become a pariah. Considering how many of them were dying, he reflected bitterly, there would soon be room aplenty.

"Which James?" he asked irritably. Part of it came from not knowing the people he was sending out to die for him for so little gain. It was easier to send people to their deaths when he didn't know them, and their casualty lists had gotten so long that it was rare for anyone to actually tell him who was lost. He didn't know them, there was nothing he could do for them, so why upset the boss.

Anyone else would have known that. Even Katie knew that, she just tended to ignore it in some half-failed attempt to 'protect him from himself', as Hermione put it. Some, she had insisted, needed to. He had asked her, once, why she didn't have the job, she'd certainly had it when they were in school. His best friend had crossed her arms and told him flatly that she wasn't she that he wasn't right, which, Harry thought, was really a sign of the times.

Katie Bell crossed her arms, "Prince James."

Harry winced. He deserved that. There really was only one 'James' that Katie would make it a point to make sure that he was told if—when he was lost. Part of him wanted to be grateful that she wasn't telling him all of the names, names of people he couldn't connect faces to, that they'd lost; another, louder, part of him wanted to hate her for it. Since he knew how...poorly he'd take that information if she gave it, he settled for not saying anything. Most of the time.

Two decades ago the idea that James Ogilvy would ever be three deaths away from sitting on the throne of the United Kingdom would have been...laughable. But then, two decades ago nobody had thought that Voldemort would have deliberately forced Disclosure on the magical world—in fact, most people who knew of Voldemort back then had been firmly convinced that he was dead, just a bad memory that could only haunt them in their dreams. Voldemort hated muggles. The idea that he'd expose the magical world to them was ludicrous.

Voldemort, however, had his eyes set on the Throne of Arthur.

The idea of the insane, powerful, and extremely evil wizard getting his hands on Camelot was a source of not a few of Harry's frequent nightmares. Camelot was Sealed for a reason. Unseal Camelot and you gained access to one of the most powerful magical sites in the world. Worse, Camelot controlled Tintagel, Tara, and Avalon.

Only the fifth and weakest of the Five had passed through the centuries unsealed, and even then most of its power had been locked away or subverted behind its guise as a school. With its power loosed Hogwarts was a fearsome Fortress, capable of withstanding nearly any assault, magical or not. With all of the Five unSealed they would amplify each other in such a way that they were more powerful than control of an five, any ten, ley nodes...excluding Atlantis and its brethren of course but they hadn't counted for almost ten millennia.

Five of the thirteen most powerful nodes (actually Fonts, which were to nodes what nodes were to ley line junctions)—nobody was quite certain how powerful Stonehenge was but it was traditionally given the thirteenth slot though the Arithmantists claimed that it could very well rival the power of lost Atlantis—in the world. Five of the seven Fonts in the Isles, all of which, for the moment at least (except for Hogwarts), were still Sealed. Only Stonehenge, capped off nearly ten millennia before, was left...and the Shadow Vale.

Hogwarts might as well have been gone. It still stood intact, but nothing had gotten in or out of it since, all the energy from the Font going into Hogwarts' wards. The British Isles' seventh Font was gone, forced to expend its power in a flash of light and death. The Shadow Vale wasn't technically one of the seven, like Atlantis and Mu and the rest it wasn't even a type of ley-line conjunction, but it was certainly accessible from the islands—and any number of other places outside of them. But desperate times or no, Harry wasn't ready to use the Shadow Veil.

Not even Voldemort was insane enough to loose its horrors into the world.

Fortunately Voldemort hadn't been able to press a claim on Camelot without someone noticing. The same safeguards that Merlin had constructed had likewise given even him pause. The wards, the fabled Walls of Camelot, would not allow anyone to press as

claimant until the four Lines of Kings that Merlin had left after dissolving the Pendragon's High Kingdom were broken.

Unlike many of his plans he hadn't gone for flashy magic and orgies of destruction, well, not at first. The killings had picked up after his rebirth, but even then it have been kept quiet enough that even the muggles hadn't realized what was happening. An accident here, an illness there, a mother ensorcelled to kill her entire family and herself, a co-worker who poisoned the company coffee pot...he'd been killing those furthest from the throne for years before he revealed the magic to the muggle world in three days of fire and death.

Actually, if the notes Severus had managed to sneak, quite unexpectedly, to Harry shortly before his torture and execution (though such worlds failed to convey the full horror of the fate Voldemort had visited upon his greatest betrayer) were to be believed, then the campaign to eliminate all the claimants to the throne of the United Kingdom had begun well before Harry's parents had even started at Hogwarts.

A ghost of a smile traced across Harry's face as he recalled the heady days after they had first learned Voldemort's true goal, or at least one of his true goals. He recalled thinking at the time that Voldemort had made a mistake. That he had not only revealed the wizarding world to the muggles in such a way that they had to take action against him, but that it was also unnecessary. Three of the Lines had been broken centuries before, the crowns of Wales and Scotland were now both held by the Kings (or Queen as the case may be) of England and had been for centuries, and Ireland was now a Republic, and as for the fourth, well William had taken that one in righteous combat almost a millennia before.

"I didn't think you'd be happy about it," Katie said, drawing him back to the present.

"I'm not," Harry said. "Just a memory."

"Oh?" she asked.

"We thought he'd screwed up," Harry said. "That all four Lines of Kings were broken, and that he was wasting himself against the Windsors and the rest. That the Line of English Kings had been

broken by William. Since the magic of the Line was passed by blood magic, and Godwinson dead at Hastings..."

Katie's eyes widened. "A bit before I joined you, I think. What happened?"

"Hermione, what else?" Harry asked with a shrug. "Turns out the consort of Edward the Second's was one of Godwinson's descendants, which restored the Line via the distaff side."

"So then he really needed to do It?" Katie asked.

Harry nodded silently as he remembered the three blood-soaked days when hundreds, thousands, had died; target of attacks, or killed trying to prevent them...or for just being in the way.

Nobody was quite certain how Balmoral's security had been breeched. A private residence of the Sovereign, it had been layered with protections both magical and mundane that the Queen's public residences simply couldn't have been (except maybe Windsor, but that castle was very nearly as old as Hogwarts with magical protections just as ancient and arcane). Instead of being the safe place it had been intended, it became a death trap. Everyone there, friend, ally, and Death Eater alike, had disappeared into a perfectly hemispherical crater a little less than two kilometers across and exactly half as deep centered on where the castle had previously stood—or to be precise, where Queen Elizabeth's parlor had previously stood. In doing so she became only the fourth English monarch to die in battle.

Despite a bid to save her family by scattering them around the globe, of the 54 people closest in succession—the living descendants of King George V—only two had survived, and Harry counted them lucky to have managed even that. The total spread throughout Europe and beyond was far worse.

Prince Charles had simply disappeared from his car while in transit; his head was discovered three days later, after most of the killing had ceased, on a pike mounted on the London Bridge. In Sydney, the Duke of York was found by the head of his security detail—untouched except for the removal of his eyes, the cause of death (including magic and poison) unknown. Half a world away in New York City, his daughters were hurried from the opera by agents from

the United States Diplomatic Protection Service and placed in an armored limousine with an armed escort. When they arrived at the British Embassy, only their hearts, in neatly gift-wrapped boxes, were found in the backseat. The Princess Royal and her husband died in their home in when their bodyguards turned their weapons on them. In Hong Kong her son died when the car he was driving home vanished in a ball of purple flames that extinguished themselves five minutes later without a trace of what had burned. And in a sign of things to come, a meteor destroyed the hotel—and most of New Deli—where the Earl of Wessex, in town for a conference in the run-up to the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and his family were staying.

Prince Harry had survived because he'd been appointed as the Royal Family's liaison to the magical world (not that the muggles knew that, but then magic was a wonderfully useful thing). His guards had the most warning, and since the detail had contained people who could use magic (unlike most of the security teams) it had managed to make a proper trap for those sent to assassinate him.

At the time the Ministry of Magic was still denying that Voldemort was going to move the magical world into the open and had declined to provide more than minimal security to the most important muggles in the government. The Order of the Phoenix had been hard pressed to provide guards and meet its previously standing obligations and had few to spare.

"What are you thinking about?"

Harry started out of his reverie to find Katie staring at him. "I'm sorry?" he asked.

Katie frowned. "You've been doing that more often, Harry. You start thinking about the past and it's like the world has come to a stop for you."

Harry shrugged. "Battle Fatigue, Allie calls it. Post Traumatic Shock Disorder is Hermione's favored term, though how this can be anything like 'post' I have no idea."

"I thought the potions were supposed to prevent that," Katie said.

"Nothing really stops it," Harry said softly. "Delays, attenuates, takes of the worst of it. I've already talked to a Healer about juggling the dosages slightly, but I'm already so close to the maximum dosing for most, even exceeding it in a few cases. I'm reaching the end of what medical magic can do. Get me in a fight and I'm still good, but anything less takes more and more from me. Most of what I have left I keep for in front of the troops."

Katie nodded slowly. "Thank you for being honest, Harry."

Harry tried to smile, but came up short. "Lying takes too much effort and you're one of the few people I trust enough to talk about this stuff to so..." He shrugged. "You asked a question?"

Katie nodded slowly, "What were you thinking about just now?"

"It." He shrugged. "Fate, destiny, luck... why James didn't believe any of it and survived when those with a lot more reason to believe, or who were better equipped to survive, didn't."

"Prince James survived," Katie said, "Because he decided to take a walk and hadn't told anyone where he was going other than 'out of the office' to one secretary who was killed before she could be interrogated."

"And the hit team moved on to their next location before he walked into them," Harry agreed. "And then he managed to keep alive, and keep a low enough profile, that we were able to get to him a day and a half later and five minutes ahead of the Death Eaters sent to kill those they had missed in their initial attacks."

Which had left them in the end with one very young, very angry king—young in an experience sense, compared to Harry—who'd been trained to fight and even spent a couple months hunting insurgents in Afghanistan, but found himself too valuable to be allowed to do more than sit in a safe-house...and since then, two infant princes. Speaking of which—

"Has Henry been told yet?" Harry asked.

Katie shook her head.

"Okay, first, how does this leave the succession? After twins, I mean."

"There's the Duke," she pointed out.

It was odd, Harry reflected, how he could remember his earlier battles, but the latter ones all seemed to blur into one another. The Battle of Buckingham he could still remember with glass-like clarity. The Duke returning from a trip abroad, planning to stay for one night before going to Balmoral. The initial Death Eater strike team, prepared for the Order of the Phoenix, but not for the fact that, ostentatious uniforms aside, the weapons carried by the Coldstream Guards were quite functional. The desperate running battle in the halls and across the ground of Buckingham. Justin Finch-Fletchy buying them the time with his life for the rest of the Duke's shrinking guard detail to get out of a broad corridor Harry had never learned the name of. The arrival of reinforcements from Horse Guards and the Met, and the moment of despair as they turned their weapons on the Duke's magical guards even as the Duke picked up an assault rifle from a dead private and turned it on Marcus Flint who had slain the young soldier moment before.

Anti-portkey and anti-disapparation wards snapped up, preventing flight, and then Katie appearing overhead with not only her teammates on the Falmouth Falcons, but the complete rosters from the Wasps and Cannons as well. William, doomed by a flesh-rotting curse that they hadn't been able to counter, leading the diversion that allowed them to break out of the palace for the gardens. Aurors, at last responding but far, far too late as they apparated into the gardens between them and the Death Eaters, realizing they were in an impossible position, but then buying the time for them to cram three, four people to a racing broom or more. Enough time for the handful left to escape.

Those were, he decided, better days. At least better than they were presently.

"He was what, four hundred in line when this all started?" Harry asked, this time managing to draw himself out of his reflection before Katie could do it.

"Four eighty-five," Katie said. "We have to move him."

"It's too dangerous."

"It's more dangerous to lose them all if the safe-house is compromised. It's bad enough that the King insists on keeping the twins with him. With Prince James gone we've got all the Family that we know are still alive, in one place. If it is compromised—"

"I know," Harry snapped. He sighed and rubbed his forehead, though he knew it wouldn't stop the rapidly-forming headache. "Look, Katie, the Duke is a hundred years old. That may not be much for one of us, but for a muggle it's positively ancient, even with what magic can do to help him which isn't much since he has no natural magic of his own. Yes, we could move him, but the strain of magical transportation may very well be the thing that does him in. He still has that damn tracker Lucius managed to hit him with so we can't move him by non-magical means without uncovering him and letting them know we're moving him—and giving them a chance to ID not only the place we're moving him to, but the King's safehouse as well—and he isn't strong enough for us to remove it like King Henry and Prince James were. If it were ten or twelve years ago I might have said go for it; for that matter if we'd figured it out when he'd first gotten tagged it'd probably still be fresh enough that we could remove it without risking his health, but now?"

Harry shook his head. "As for the twins, they're less than six years old. Let them enjoy their family. It's the only one they have."

"Hannah—"

Harry glared at her, a trickle of the old half-remembered anger stirring in him. But compared to how angry he remembered being when he'd found out that his friends had agreed not to write to him after fourth year, this was like embers of a hearth fire gone mostly cold compared to a bonfire. "I know Hannah loved Neville. Well he's dead and there's no magic that any of us are willing to touch that will bring him back. Not even Allie, I asked, which shows just how desperate I am. The King wanted to breed magic back into the Royal line. I'm not so certain that it's possible if what Prince Charles told us about that Curse that was placed on the line—what, four centuries back?—was anything close to accurate.

"'When magic sits on the throne', you remember that part?" Katie asked. "We've all assumed that the only one who can actually unseal the locks has to be sitting on the throne, but nothing we have actually says that. It just says that a witch or wizard, not even a trained one, has to be on the throne. Which means that if King Henry dies we're fucked. It'll be years before the twins are old and powerful enough to undo the Seals."

"You know I've always thought Hermione misinterpreted that part," Harry said. "She doesn't do it often, I admit, but when she does it is harder to get her to admit it than it is to...well, pick something really hard to do. I'll go even one further and point out that there is nothing that says that 'Magic' has to be of a Royal line. Also, it says 'magic's throne', Camelot was Arthur's, not Merlin's."

Katie blinked. "Do you mean to say that you think we could have gained access to Camelot?"

Harry shrugged.

"Why didn't you say something before?" she demanded.

"I did," Harry snapped. "King Henry overturned me, end of story."

"And since when do you follow an order you don't believe in?" Katie asked, crossing her arms.

"Since it was my only choice!" Harry threw back at her. "What was I supposed to do? We were still dancing around each other, magic, muggle, all the rest. We weren't organized. I wasn't their war leader. I didn't know if we could take the damn gate and hold it long enough for Hermione and Luna and the rest to get us through. Do it and keep them and Henry alive. And face it, I screwed up and people weren't exactly happy with me."

"What you did—"

"Was wrong. I. Fucked. Up," Harry said. "I should have done my job, got Prince William clear like I was supposed to. I didn't, he died, end of story."

"So then why did you do it?" Katie asked, and Harry didn't need clarification to know exactly which 'it' she was talking about.

"Because I don't know for a fact that Hermione is wrong. Because I can see a lot of advantages in having a King, or at least members of the Royal Family, that is magical. Because it was something I could do at the time to gain back some of that trust, and because he'd be more likely to stay where it's safe if he had a couple of lives he was responsible for protecting if all else went wrong.

"It isn't as though we had a list of options to choose from. If Henry marrying Hannah was the price of securing the throne, even a little, that was a price I was, and am—"

"Are you even listening to yourself, Harry?" Katie asked. "You sound exactly like the way that you complained Dumbledore acted like."

"And what exactly am I supposed to act like?" Harry asked, suddenly very tired indeed. "Only twenty percent of my year is still alive—that's if you include Parkinson, Parvati after what happened to her, and Him, which I don't. Thirty percent of yours, only Luna is left from hers... Of all the people who were at Hogwarts with me—students in seventh year my first through those in their first year during my last, and teachers included—there are what, twenty still alive who aren't working for Voldemort or fled the country?"

Harry gave the book he had been studying, a feeble shove. "We all have our prices to pay if we're going to win. Mine is to send my friends out to be killed while I try to kill him. So far I've been more successful in the former than the later. Just...let me take some measure of relief in managing to save one of my friends."

"I was friends with her before I was friends with you," Katie said softly. "She lived across the street, and there are less than four months, and September 1st, between them." She smiled wistfully, "I had such a hard time explaining Hogwarts without telling her about magic."

Harry frowned, "I thought Hannah was half-and-half."

"She is," Katie said. "But I'm muggle-born and I didn't know that. She was so depressed when she told me that she'd be going to a different boarding school and that it'd be nearly impossible for us to write—I'd taken stationary my first year and had been sending hers to my parents so that she wouldn't be getting owls. That's why it was

so funny when she got sorted...I pranked her good for that." Her expression hardened, "You didn't do her any kindness by setting her up with King Henry."

"I don't expect her to thank me and I won't be terribly upset if she curses me for it. As long as she can do so it means she's still alive," Harry said. "As for the Duke, no, he stays where he is. He's the only person we have left now that's able to exert anything like an influence on Henry. He's stopped listening to me though I can't say I blame him. Merlin knows he has more than enough cause.

"If Hermione's research team is able to figure out and bypass those Seals, if we can win through to the Gates and hold it long enough, and if nothing else crops up and it almost certainly will were we to try waking Camelot, he's going to have all of the mystical power of the Throne of Arthur behind him. Provided, of course," he smiled mirthlessly, "that what Padma thinks happened at Balmoral is actually what happened."

Katie snorted, "What would you have said in Hogwarts if you'd been told that one day Hermione would be working to bypass wards put up by Merlin to safeguard Camelot for Arthur's return?"

"Thinks its funny, do you?" Harry asked. "Do you really want Henry running around with all that power without someone who can make him stop and think?"

Katie froze, then shook her head. "No, you're right. If half the stories are true he's worse than you were when you were a third his age."

"He's not quite that bad," Harry said. "And he has some other things going for him. But he's lost more family than ever I did. I never had that much to lose."

"Family of blood, maybe," Katie said as she gently closed the door and moved to sit on his desk. "I know you, Harry Potter," she said softly as she brushed a lock of hair back to expose his scar. "You made your own family. A family of love and friendship instead of blood, but a family still. That's why you feel like someone's carving out your heart whenever one of us dies."

"So who else is left?" Katie asked gently after Harry didn't reply.

"There are a couple of people we never were able to confirm were dead. Most of them are near the bottom of the list and probably are, but there are two or three between Charles and the Duke," Harry said. "Avery's team missed Queen Margrethe of Denmark. We aren't sure why, Voldemort hasn't made a secret about wanting to end the Royal Family in deed as well as name, but there are a number of people that have been killed that he hasn't bothered drawing attention to. There hasn't been any announcement of her death or someone ascending to her throne, either."

"Europe is in so much chaos it's possible that no one can get the message out," Katie said. "Or even knows if she's dead or not."

"Or it's possible that the Danes took our warning a little more seriously than anyone else and got her squirreled away before Avery's team got to her. Or maybe it's something like what happened with James," Harry said. "An unscheduled trip, maybe an unannounced vacation or a change in travel plans, heck, maybe she was in the loo and the Death Eaters never bothered to check. But Avery missed the hit, and that was enough warning to get her away."

Katie nodded slowly, and Harry could see her eyes take on a hard, vacant cast as she remembered that day. "That series of strikes were targeted to eliminate the most people, and the most prominent, as quickly as possible. There wasn't a lot of follow up right away—magical tracking, that kind of thing."

"Exactly," Harry said. "Look at what happened with Henry, James, and the Duke. The initial teams went in and either went on to the next—as in the case of James—or got carved up. No response after the initial attack for a day and a half in the case of James, almost two for Henry, by then we had him and the others secure. Thank Merlin."

Katie nodded again, wordlessly this time.

The Duke of Edinburgh had been too old to go into the field, but his quiet, solid strength had done more for holding together the disparate coalition of former Ministry of Magic, Order of the Phoenix, DA, magical refugee, muggle military, non-magical refugee, foreign volunteers, and more than a dozen other groups, and turning them into a force that was capable of at least getting within spitting-range

of Voldemort's allies. In the dark days after Disclosure, when it seemed like the rest of the world was going to disappear in a nuclear and magical fireball, the Duke, more than anyone else, had managed to drag the United Kingdom kicking and screaming through the chaos and into the new, darker, world.

"To be fair," Harry continued after a moment, "it wasn't really Death Eaters' focus at the time. They'd already removed a lot of the most distant persons—not that anyone recognized it for what it was—and his decapitation of the entire blood-line was orchestrated too tightly. There was barely time for his teams to make one hit and move on to the next."

"Well we knew that they thought that they'd be able to sweep up the rest at their leisure," Katie agreed. "And we thought it was all just a blow to the non-magical world's morale."

"Which it was, of course, we just didn't realize that it was also more than just an attack on public morale," Harry sighed. "And now that we know it isn't, we have to spend time and effort looking for each one. So does Voldemort, of course, but he's had more time and manpower to spare than we do."

Both lapsed into silence, Harry staring gloomily at his desk and Katie silently watching him.

"You'd have thought we'd have heard something if she's still alive," she said after it became clear Harry wasn't going to resume the conversation.

Harry shrugged.

"It wouldn't change anything," she sighed. "All it would do is keep us one more death away from what he wants. Waiting like this is a losing strategy."

"Never argued with that," Harry said slowly.

"Why doesn't he just break the Line?" Katie asked.

"Hmm?"

"Why doesn't he break the Line?" Katie repeated. "Like William the Conqueror did?"

"Oh, that," Harry said, feeling his ears heat.

"Harry," Katie said.

"Well, um, first off, he hasn't managed to kill the King, not like William did."

"He killed Queen Elizabeth, at least by proxy, and it wasn't like William the Conqueror defeated the previous king in single combat," Katie said.

Harry shifted in his seat. "Truthfully?" he asked. At Katie's nod he continued, "Because he has to actually hold the titles for himself, Hermione thinks. Now, Ireland's a wash, what with the Republic and all. If he wanted to, and we're not sure why he hasn't, he could probably claim England and Wales at this point by right of conquest. If he did there are couple of nifty little things we can do, but he's probably aware of them as we are. Scotland, however, has some very interesting caveats where its monarchs are concerned. And, well, I uh..." he mumbled something very quickly.

"What was that? I don't think I heard you," Katie said.

"Professor McGonagall may have, uh, borrowed, the Stone of Scone," Harry said.

"Barrowed," Katie repeated flatly.

"And, uh, St. Edward's Chair," Harry said, "And the Crown Jewels, and... well..." he shrugged.

"Wow," Katie said. "Professor McGonagall? Are you sure?"

Harry nodded.

"Huh." Katie regarded him for a minute. "That isn't going to hold him back though, not forever."

"True, but you knew that," Harry said. "What's your point?"

"My point is, what if there was another way?"

"Another way to do what?" Harry asked. "We can't put Harry on the Throne of Arthur—or destroy the damn thing which would solve that problem just as easily—until we can get past the Seals ourselves. We can't get past the Seals until Hermione can figure out how to undo them without blowing us up. Even if she accomplishes that, we then have to get past the second set of Seals which, as far as I know, none of us know how to do. As for Voldemort, what would you suggest; killing curse? I tried that. Black magic? We tried that too; along with plagues, nerve gas, a summoned meteor like the one that got Prince Edward and his family."

He gestured past her at the book he had been avoiding reading when she had walked in. "I've spent the past six years wallowing in some of the darkest magics known to human-kind after we decided that the stuff I was using wasn't going to work. I'm still no closer to defeating him. I've fought him seven times since the Department of Mysteries. Each of those times I've been lucky to escape with my life, most of those times I have very nearly gotten myself killed and I have nothing to show for it except still more dead friends.

"The one thing we haven't tried is the Shadow Veil. We could probably get in and access it—Allie could do it in a heartbeat but she won't because she's terrified of it—but you do remember what she said about that option don't you? I'm not about to trade one dark lord for another. Especially since...she's a friend."

Harry pushed himself up and stalked to the window. In contrast to his feelings and the world he lived in it was a bright and cheery morning. "He's abandoned using Horcruxes and reclaimed the three pieces of his soul that we didn't manage to destroy," he continued steadily as he gazed out at the grass, trying to remember what it felt like to walk through grass with bare feet. "Allie confirmed it. In fact she thinks that they would actually make him more vulnerable at this point rather than less, which is probably why he's reclaimed them."

"I suppose if anyone would know it'd be her," Katie agreed unhappily.

"So the one weakness we knew about is gone," Harry went on. "The one thing we have still going our way is that there's still someone sitting on the Throne of the United Kingdom. As long as that is true, he can't get past the Seals on Camelot.

"And if he gets Camelot he gets the three most powerful Fonts in the world. And we all know what he really has his eyes set on. Avalon is bad enough—you haven't seen it but Allie showed me one of her ancestor's memories, one of Merlin and the...thing he fought there."

"Atlantis," Katie said.

"Yes, and Mu, and Lemuria," Harry shook his head. "The pre-cataclysm Fonts are lost with the civilizations that grew around them. That's why it's called a 'cataclysm', Katie. Besides, would you really want to risk awakening the...whatever the hell it was that they ran into? What Voldemort could awaken if he got his hands on Avalon is bad enough." He turned and leaned against the wall.

"You do remember what Merlin said fourteen hundred years ago, after doing battle with something not of this world, that made him seal Avalon behind the Mists for the last time, don't you?"

"Yes," Katie said flatly. She cocked her head to one side, "Did Hermione ever find out how Lovecraft came up with that line? Was it really just coincidence or—" she shrugged and the look he gave her, "—I suppose it doesn't matter. Do you think he's going to summon an Old One?"

"I think it hardly matters what his intentions are if one of those breaches the barriers into this world," Harry said dryly. "There's a reason why going beyond the Outer Gates is verboten."

He sighed heavily as Katie moved up behind him and wrapped one arm around him into a loose hug, gently taking the book from him. Harry could feel the book silently pulsing with forbidden knowledge, and magic burned like a million trapped army ants under his skin. It wasn't the kind and wholesome magic he had first learned at Hogwarts, but the kind that let him wreak destruction without even using a wand. The magic that could have a person screaming in pain from the touch of a finger, or could steal the life from a person with a kiss.

But then Katie tossed the book tossed the book across the room in the direction of a bookcase with more tomes scattered on the floor around it. The nearly tangible connection between him and the book was severed instantly though he could still feel the urge to use the

dark magic taunting him. That was one of their great dangers. The dark magics were heady things, powerful, easy to use, seductive. You could use them and never notice that the more you used them the more you had to use them until you were destroying everything around you for that oh-so-sweet high, which was so much better than having to face reality. Any reality. Katie's second arm joined the first.

For a moment Harry let himself sag against her warm body. "I don't know, Katie. I used to. I used to understand what he was going for; what his final goals were in the first war, for example. I understood his quest for immortality, as insane as it was. I understood the Horcruxes. I could even predict how he'd go about doing something, once I knew what that something was, as recently as last year. Now..." he shook his head. "I don't know what his goal is, but he has one. He always has a goal, however insane it might be. He isn't stupid no matter how much we might wish it."

He pushed himself away so that he could turn and look at her. "I don't know what he's planning or what he's going to do. I can't anticipate him anymore. He can torture me with our link, but I can't use it to read him. Not for the last seven months."

"We're going to lose, aren't we," Katie said softly. It wasn't a question.

Harry hesitated, and then slowly nodded his head. "We're going to lose. Not today or tomorrow, but some time in the next couple of months; maybe a year tops." He snorted and. "Hell, it doesn't matter. We've lost already. He doesn't need to kill Henry, or the twins, or the Duke, or even me. Even if I managed to kill him tomorrow the world is already so utterly fucked that if King Arthur himself showed up again brandishing Excalibur before him, all he could do is watch the world burn."

"America—"

"Has kept it from disappearing into a nuclear fireball, so far," Harry said. "But it's like trying to stop a firestorm by pissing on it."

"What if you could do it all again?" Katie asked after a moment.

"Do what? Lose?" Harry asked scornfully as he pulled away from her, and Katie let him go. "We already looked into time-travel, remember? You go too far outside of your proper place in time and temporal dissonance will kill even before quantum cascade causes your molecules to decoalesce. A couple of hours is safe, a week, even a month or so, is survivable, if you're willing to take the risk of meddling with time. We'd need years."

"That's only if you use conventional time-travel," Katie said.

"What other kind is there?" Harry asked.

"We might have another option, a ritual."

"Oooh, a ritual," Harry said sarcastically. "What a great idea. I had Allie work out the power requirements for long-range, long-time, whatever...time-travel once; I figured I could drop a note to myself or something since temporal dissonance will kill anything living or unliving we send through. How many virgins do I have to kill to gather the power for it?"

"None."

"How else are you going to power it?" he asked, crossing his arms. "It's not exactly like you can hook a magic circle up to the ever-convenient nearest power grid." He glanced at the unlit light fixture in the ceiling. It wasn't unlit because it was day. "Assuming there was a working power grid to hook it up to."

"With a barely-controlled temporal paradox," Katie said.

"I don't think I've seen one of those yet," Harry said. "How would you make one? Destroying time-turners doesn't do it. I destroyed so many in the Department of Mysteries—"

"A prophecy," Katie said.

"A prophecy told you how to invoke a barely-controlled temporal paradox?" Harry asked dubiously. "Go on, pull the other one."

"The prophecy states that you and he are destined to kill the other," Katie said. "To invoke a paradox we simply need for one of you to die, but not at the other's hand."

"I doubt he's going to die of old age," Harry said. "And it's pretty unlikely that I am going to live long enough to die that way. Besides, nobody except Voldemort can kill me, though I suppose I could try dying in an accident."

He frowned, "Would it be accidental if we did it on purpose?"

"Actually, there is one other person than him that can kill you," Katie said. "Or at least Luna thinks so."

"Oh," Harry thought about it for a moment before shrugging. "Well, if Luna thinks so..."

Katie nodded as he moved back to her, and this time it was her turn to lean into him.

"If she's right, if this works..." Harry mused. "Fred would still be alive, and George, and Angelina..."

"And Ginny," Katie cut in.

"Jealous?" Harry asked.

"I knew I'd have to share you with her...memory, before we ever got involved," Katie said.

"I meant that if this worked," Harry said. "Are you jealous of Ginny?"

Katie was silent for a moment. "No," she said finally. "I won't be. I won't remember." She leaned her head away so that he could see her face. "None of us will."

Part One of Four

A most ingenious paradox
We've quips and quibbles heard in flocks,
But none to beat this paradox!

W.S. Gilbert & Arthur Sullivan, the Pirates of Penzance

Safe House- Strawgoh

Location: CLASSIFIED-TOP SECRET

November 27, 2021—19:45-zulu

6,340 days since beginning of the Second Voldemort War

4,774 days after Disclosure.

"Do you know why Luna insists on changing the name of her safe-house no less than three times a week?" Harry asked as he followed his friend/lover/aide-de-camp/ executive officer/whatever he needed her to be, down into the basement of Luna's safehouse.

Katie shrugged. "Security?" she asked, maneuvering around shelves of cardboard boxes. Some spilled toys he half-recognized from thankfully-brief summers spent in Dudley's second bedroom. Others held scraps of leather, or pots of wax. One had a box covered with aluminum foil on its top shelf, while the shelves below it were filled with camping and scout-craft books.

"Hermione finds obscure historical references, Terry references old science-fiction movies, Luna picks things like 'safe house' and reversing the name of our school," Harry pointed out as they walked through a small maze of pedestal-mounted power tools.

"She's Luna," Katie said, shrugging again as she opened a door squeezed into the same small alcove that was filled by the non-functioning furnace, and led him down a flight of narrow stairs. The ritual room was in a second basement carved out of the ground with a carefully measured amount of magic to assist the otherwise purely mundane tools. Unlike the first basement, it was cool and dank with moldering brick walls and a dirt floor. At the best of times it would have been dark and unpleasant.

As it was, it was cold bordering on freezing—what with the restriction on active magic less a concentration of magical energy alert Voldemort. Muggle methods of heating were also out. The disruption of basic utilities (in this case gas) meant the furnace was

useless. In the upper floors where there was adequate ventilation muggle space heaters were being used to take off the worst of the chill, but there wasn't enough ventilation to make even that small relief safe in the basement.

A few camp lanterns with dying batteries competed with several wane globes of mage-light. It was enough to more or less illuminate the work area, but it plunged the rest of the room into uneven shadows.

A large circle of silver was embedded in the floor of this area. Glyphs and runes in silver, gold, and what looked suspiciously like blood both human and, Harry was fairly certain, unicorn, flowed around it. More runes had been carved into the walls and glowed with every color visible to the human eye and several that weren't.

"Very pretty," Harry said, stopping to examine one rune glowing a cheerful bubblegum-pink that reminded him of a long-dead Auror. "This is going to let me travel back in time?"

"We aren't going to attempt time travel, that's impossible," Luna's voice was high-pitched and thin, sort of reedy, but it oozed across the room and made Harry shiver.

"What about time-turners?" Harry asked. "I've used one to change time on several occasions."

"No, you didn't. Any events in the past have already occurred before you ever left the present."

"But I..." Harry paused as Luna stepped out of one of the shadowy corners. As usual, she was staring at him with her slightly protruding eyes. But while it had been little more than mildly disquieting when he'd first met her, now he found it out-right creepy. Luna had seen Edinburgh die, and while magic had saved her life—even to the point where she had no visible scars from it—it wasn't capable of repairing retinas seared by staring directly into a nuclear fireball. Fortunately for all, the world had seemed to come to agreement that quadrupling the number of the things used in anger, and directly killing thirty or forty million people, was quite enough...so far at least.

"Huh?" he asked uncomfortably.

"You can't change events, whatever was going to happen has already happened," Luna told him, acting as though she hadn't noticed his reaction, but he knew she had. Luna noticed everything, she just didn't comment on it, and he wondered if she had chosen to ignore his stumbling because it was irrelevant, or because it hurt. He wasn't honestly sure which of the two he would have preferred.

Harry managed to not rub his forehead. Luna was one of their more brilliant researchers, but the years and losses had only made her stranger though she had become slightly more understandable.

"I saved Buckbeak's life and rescued Sirius from being eaten by dementors, and then from being fed to them," Harry said.

"Was Buckbeak dead before you saved him?" Luna asked.

"That's what I said," Harry crossed his arms. "Losing your head does that, you know? Kills you, I mean. That's why I went back to before he'd lost it."

"Did you actually see him lose it?" Katie asked.

"I—" Harry stopped. "No," he said after a moment. "I don't remember if I checked later or not. I sort of had a lot on my mind." He frowned, "Sirius hadn't been broken out yet, that's why we went back, to get him out and..." he shook his head, "Why does it matter?

"If we can't send me, or you, or someone else, back to change what has happened then what good is all of this? If we can't change what's happened why even bother trying? And what would the point of that bloody thing be?" he demanded, gesturing at the circle.

Luna looked at it vaguely. "Oh, that's just to harness the paradox. They're quite hard to generate. I believe that I'll be able to stabilize it for less than half an anti-second."

"So I can send someone back in time to just before I die?" Harry asked. "Doesn't that kind of defeat the point?"

"No, no," Luna shook her head. "Anti-time. It's like normal time but inverted, not reversed." She paused, "Actual time is like a klein flask, or perhaps a mobius strip. You can't change it because it's all the

same. If you go back, you're still on the same place so you really aren't going back at all, just changing your specific location."

"Luna, can I?" Katie asked.

"Oh, I suppose," Luna said, sounding quite put-out.

"You remember Hermione talking about anti-matter?"

"Vaguely," Harry said, "Some kind of ultra-rare explosive, I think. It was never my department—I can drop a city into hell and I'm probably one of the three most accomplished necromancers alive, but I use potions and explosives, I don't bother to understand how they work. I made plans to sneak some in under the Citadel—she said a gram would be enough to take out the Fortress of Despair and Voldemort with it—but she was never able to get her hands on it."

"Think of anti-time as more so, only the explosion it generates is, well, time," Katie said.

"So a half-second isn't so bad?" Harry asked.

"Except that it explodes both backwards and forwards in time," Katie said.

"So doing this will destroy what...time?"

"Exactly," Luna said.

"How much time?" Harry asked slowly.

"All of it, of course," Luna said as though it should have been perfectly obvious. "Very dangerous stuff, time. Not enough and you always miss dinner. Too much and the story is finished before you have to go to sleep."

"And now you're being deliberately obtuse," Harry said. "So I have two questions. How sure are you that this is going to work, and do I really need to understand how it is going to work."

"Kathryn insisted that you understand before we attempt to utilize a paradox," Luna said.

Katie grimaced, but whether it was at the use of her first name, or because Luna had revealed something she hadn't really wanted known, Harry couldn't tell.

"Katie?" he asked.

She hesitated, but only briefly. "There might be a...hole, I guess, in the Prophecy. You and Voldemort are protected from being killed by anyone other than each other. That means whatever protection you both share, you both can penetrate. So it may be possible for you to kill yourself—"

"And creates a paradox because only Voldemort is supposed to be able to kill me," Harry said flatly.

"Yes," Katie said firmly.

Harry looked away uncomfortably. "Okay," he said slowly. "Didn't really expect that, I admit. I still don't understand why I need all of this temporal-magics background."

"Because we need your help determining what to influence and how," Katie said. "You stand a better chance of knowing how you, how a younger you, is going to react better than anyone."

Harry turned back to her. "So I hop into that little circle and kill myself which'll destroy everything either up until my birth, or the Prophecy is spoken. Whichever. Flash of light, I drop dead. Boom. The last thirty or so years wiped away in an eye-blink, save for someone we send back to before it all happens and you want my advice on who that person should be?"

"We can't send a person back," Katie said. "Luna and Hermione have both been very specific about that. And it doesn't destroy the last thirty years in an eye-blink, it can't. The destruction wave can't move any faster than time itself...in theory."

"You seem to know an awful lot about this," Harry said.

"I insisted on understanding how it would work before I ever brought it to your attention," Katie said.

"Uh-huh," Harry said. "And your thoughts on it?"

"I don't like it but..." she looked away. "Even if you won tomorrow, so what, Harry? You pointed out yourself how messed up the world has become."

"So you want me to do this," Harry said. "You want me to kill myself."

Katie flinched, and a little part of him was happy that it hurt her. "I don't like it," she repeated softly. "I just don't see how much of a choice we have left."

Harry stared at her for a moment without moving. Finally he shrugged slightly. "Fair enough," he said. "So I suppose my next question is, if we can't send someone back to change things, how does this help us? I mean, there's a saying in the muggle world, or at least there was, that repeating something and expecting a different outcome is the definition of insanity. Isn't...hitting the magical reset button just an example of that?"

"The explosive front only moves as fast as time. If we can stabilize it for half of an anti-second, we can send a Change back. The temporal destruction wave won't arrive until after our change takes effect. Since that change will alter the flow, time will only be destroyed back to the point where the new time deviated from our time, but not before it, making the future from the new time free to be created again."

"That way everything after the change hasn't actually happened yet," Harry said slowly. "Dumbledore won't be dead, Voldemort won't have tried to eliminate all claimants to the Throne, the world won't be tearing itself into very tiny pieces...assuming our change takes place far enough back in time."

He frowned. "What if me killing myself satisfies the Prophecy just as much as he killing me would? I mean, I carried around a piece of his soul for years, Katie. I may not have the Dark Mark branded on my arm, but I do bear his mark."

"Then we're all screwed," Katie said softly.

"The thought had occurred to me," Luna said.

"You didn't tell us," Katie said.

"I did not want to worry you needlessly, Kathryn," Luna said.

"Just as long as you all realize the risk you're taking," Harry said dryly. "I won't worry about that, if you don't mind, since if it comes up I'll already be dead. The next question is what do we send back, if we can't send a person?"

"We can't send anything material, back," Katie said. "Hermione and Padma both agree that the Arithmancy is quite clear. Spiritual is...nebulous."

"You got Allie to do that part?" Harry asked, wondering just how they had managed that feat. This sounded just like something the Lady of Thornes would have objected to...strenuously.

"Hermione and Padma did all the Arithimantical calculations," Katie said. "Allie doesn't know. I...we...think that her Oaths would force her to work against us if she knew we were doing this."

"And Hermione doesn't trust her," Harry said.

"She's not a very likeable person," Katie said awkwardly. "I know she's saved our lives more than once, but the way she fights, the things she can do..." she looked away.

"The things she can do?" Harry asked incredulously. "What about the things I can do? I put an honest-to-Merlin Curse on Liverpool. And if you want I can certainly compare Dresden and Paris and debate which of us committed the bigger atrocity."

"I know you trust her," Katie said, ignoring his outburst. "I trust her too for that matter, but I have a hard time blaming Hermione for not trusting her."

Harry nodded tightly and turned to Luna. "So you can't send a person. You can't send a book telling what happens. What did you mean by spiritual? You want to send a ghost?"

"A soul," Luna said.

Katie gave her a sideways look. "Luna had an idea that we use Allie's pet dementor to trap your soul after you're dead but before it can...pass on, and then send your soul back and hope it ends up in your own body in the past where it would...possess your old body."

"I'll pass," Harry said flatly.

"I thought you'd say that," she said. "Actually we had a ghost that was willing to do it and serve as an advisor, but the temporal mechanics won't allow for it," she shrugged. "Something about the possibility of him meeting himself while he was still alive."

"What about a ghost that was already a ghost?"

Katie took a deep breath, "In some ways that's our best option, as far as directly changing something goes. It should also negate the problems of temporal dissonance."

"But..."

"Quantum cascade failure," Luna said. "Two spirits in the same time-space."

"Don't you mean space-time?" Harry asked.

"No."

"Also, Padma and Hermione haven't come out and said it, but I think there might be a problem with the numbers," Katie said. "Neither of them will admit it, but this whole thing is an area where Allie is just better than they are."

"So what can we do?" Harry crossed his arms and leaned carefully against a small patch of wall that was rune-free. "I assume you have some sort of plan if ghosts and souls aren't an option."

"We can directly influence one event very briefly," Katie said. "And it has to be...small with far-ranging consequences. Something that can snowball into creating a drastic enough change to entirely reorder the last twenty years or so. We can possibly do two or three things, depending on how long the Paradox stabilizes, but predicting the outcome becomes much harder with that many variables, and it

can work in Voldemort's favor as well. That is why it has to be done carefully."

"I understand that strokes can be pretty small," Harry said. "Let's time it for the summer after my fourth year and—"

"There's a problem with directly assassinating him," Katie said. "Two, actually."

"Of course," Harry sighed. "And now that I think about it there're three."

"Four," Luna said.

"Two," Katie said. "First is the Prophecy, if we kill him it'll set up a new paradox...if it works at all since it won't be you doing the influencing. If it doesn't—"

"It won't change anything, I think I got that," Harry said.

"The second problem is that we can't influence events far enough in the past for the prophecy not to be a problem, which bars us from taking him out in the eighties or even before he enters Hogwarts."

"Three," Harry said. "You're forgetting about the horcruxes. He won't have tried to dismantle them yet."

"Four," Luna repeated. "You can't have a stroke without a brain to stroke."

Katie gave her a blank look. "Right," she said slowly.

"So not only does my death create a paradox, but you use the energy involved..." Harry was silent for a moment. "Okay, I think I've paid enough attention to Hermione and Allie to assume that what you're saying might be possible...maybe...in theory...I hope. So what's the problem with it other than we can't send anything back?"

"Not a problem, a limitation," Luna said. "Katie and I disagree on the limits of how far back we can alter time. It is my belief that we will be able to insert a change at any time between the event that brings the paradox into being, and the event that lays the foundation for the paradox itself."

"Which would be what, the Prophecy being made, or my being marked as his equal?" Harry asked.

"No," Luna said. "The foundation cannot be laid after the initial requirements of the Prophecy have been met."

"I have to be Marked," Harry said flatly.

"Yes," Luna agreed, "that would be one way of looking at it."

Katie shrugged, "From what Hermione's said, we can meddle at any point in time where you were alive, and that we can't go any further back than the moment of your birth."

"So much for simply going back to the forties and killing him then," Harry said.

"The Hitler Time-Travel Exemption Act would have prevented us from assassinating Tom Riddle before his first rise to power," Luna said.

"Oh please," Katie said. "That was put into effect to remind people of the Secrecy Statutes!"

Luna shook her head, "The limitations on temporal traveling would have been the same as they are today. In any case, it would have made little difference if someone had gone and murdered that poor Austrian painter. If it was done too late, Heinrich Himmler would have been left in charge of the Reich, hardly a positive outcome. If it was done before the Reich was established it would have only left a hole for another person, perhaps with a more stable mind and personality to fill, with the same—or worse—outcome as happened in this reality."

"In this reality?" Harry asked, if someone had actually found a way around the problems, then maybe.... "You mean somebody actually did it?"

Luna shrugged, "Of course. You just have not perceived it because it happened in another reality."

"Oh," Harry muttered, "of course. So what can we do?"

"As discussed, we cannot, for example, make Voldemort suffer a heart attack before he arrives to murder your family," Luna began.

"Actually," Katie thought for a moment.

Harry sighed. "Can we, or can't we, someone make a decision."

"Maybe," Katie said. "If we timed it for after your birth but before he fulfilled the final requirement to determine who his mortal enemy is. Leave the whole thing open-ended."

Luna stamped her foot irritably. "If something did happen, and mind this would invalidate the paradox because of the failure to Mark Harry, he would either survive it and nothing would change, or it would kill him until he was once again in the position to be reborn and—"

"And I wouldn't have Mum's protection since he wouldn't have murdered her," Harry finished. "It'd also leave the whole thing up in the air between Neville and me."

He shook his head, "Assassinating him is out. We're going to have to make a change on our side that makes us more effective."

Katie nodded sharply, while Luna merely blinked.

"Could we make Sirius take me on the night of their murder instead of him giving me to Hagrid while he goes chasing after Pettigrew?"

Katie nodded, "Except that everyone at that time thinks that he betrayed the Potters. We can't change that—one event, one person, or one thing, not more. I'm not sure we could convince everyone of his innocence in the first place. If everyone knows that he is the Potters' secret keeper, and the appears the day after they die with you in his arms. We just can't predict what will happen with any certainty. Especially if he takes you on the run, you will be unprepared for later."

"Daddy could print an article in the Quibbler," Luna said.

"I'm still not sure that's the right way," Katie told her. "Besides, what would he say? I'm not sure that we can give information and

knowledge, and we aren't going to be able to have a trial run. One shot. That's all we get so we have to make it count the first time."

"What would you recommend?" Harry asked. "Something at school?"

"Magic is by nature chaotic," Luna said. "Fluctuations in the Potential Probability Field make it impractical to try and pick a specific point in time-space to influence. A further reason why attempting to assassinate Voldemort is likely to be unsuccessful."

"So we do it before he starts Hogwarts," Katie said flatly. "That or do it during the summer while he's at the Dursleys, though the former would be better." She turned to Harry, "I don't think you quite realize how...isolated you were. I mean, aside from Hermione and—"

"I never needed anyone other than them," Harry sighed. He smiled and added: "And the Quidditch team, of course."

Katie smiled, "True, but did you really know anyone from the other houses, or even other years aside from us? You need to be able to branch out, to start making allies from the start. Or at least generating the ties that will help you make allies. You did okay your fifth year, between the Order and the DA, but even then you didn't branch beyond them until after Dumbledore died."

"I didn't find out about magic until my eleventh birthday, though the letters started arriving a week before," Harry said. "Hagrid brought me to London."

"Who'd you meet in Diagon Alley?" Katie asked.

"A lot of people I didn't know," Harry said. "Olivander, of course; Grigotts... Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, Quirrel was there too, come to think of it." He frowned, "Draco Malfoy was getting fitted for robes at Madam Milkins. Between him and Hagrid I'd pretty much made up my mind not to be put in Slytherin. I told the Hat I didn't care where I went as long as it wasn't there."

"I'm not sure we could interfere with the Sorting Hat," Katie said. "It's an Old magical construct. Maybe we could have someone else bump into you?"

"Who?" Harry asked. "We were eleven; we all believed—parroted—the things our parents told us."

"Someone older. 'Dora Lupin maybe?'"

"She'd have been in what, her seventh year?" Harry asked. "What reason would she have for bumping into me? I might have been famous, but aside from something that happened when I was one I was pretty much a nobody. How about the train?"

"What happened there?"

"Um... I met the Weasleys. Hermione stopped by looking for something, and Draco made his usual train-ride appearance. You know, the Potty-Weasel, some families are better than others, thing."

Katie nodded, "I remember."

"That was the strangest tradition, you know?"

Harry turned at the new voice, "Hey, Padma, when did you get in?"

"A couple of hours ago," Padma said. "I was double-checking the star-charts for this."

"Of course," Harry said, and paused. "What about Allie?" He asked suddenly. "You knew her by then."

"Barely," Padma said. "I just knew her as someone a few years older than me who knew my father and stopped by on occasion and usually had something neat or a good story or something. I know she didn't care for Diagon alley. Most of the specialty stores she needed were on Knockturn or one of the smaller alleys. I suppose we could try setting you up to meet with someone else. You're trying to decide who or what to influence?"

Katie nodded. "Any ideas?"

"Professor Lupin, perhaps? I know he was a friend of your family's," Padma offered.

"You're forgetting the anti-werewolf legislation at the time," Harry said. "Remus wasn't out in the open, but he was registered. The fact

that the Ministry kept the list of people who were registered more or less secret was one of the few things I respected about the place."

Katie grimaced. "I still can't believe the way I treated him when I found out. Who else is there that you ran into before Hogwarts?"

"Nobody," Harry asked. "I ran into a couple of people I found out who were wizards and witches later, Diggle, for example. But aside from Arabella Figg, who was a squib, there wasn't a witch or wizard for miles where I lived. There's no chance I could run into one."

"What about when you did accidental magic, did they send anyone?" Padma asked.

Harry shook his head, "I grew all my hair back once after Aunt Petunia shaved it off. I think I remembered a disgusting jumper that shrank when she tried to make me wear it... I ended up on top of the kitchens in primary school once when I was trying to run away from Dudley's..." he paused.

"From Dudley's' what?" Katie asked.

"Dudley's birthday," Harry said slowly. "That spring before I turned eleven. That birthday we went to the London Zoo."

"So?"

"So the Dursleys never took me anywhere," Harry said. "But Mrs. Figg had a broken leg and Petunia's friend...I don't remember what happened to her, but something happened that I couldn't go there and they couldn't leave me with Vernon's sister Marge... So they took me with them to the zoo. I talked to a boa, I didn't know about magic, or parseltongue, or anything. I made the glass of its cage disappear, and it scared Dudley as it escaped..."

Luna blinked slowly, "It avoids the high magic concentrations of Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, the Hogwarts Express, and Harry's home."

Harry shook his head, "There wasn't any magic where I was growing up, not enough to register as a high concentration, Luna; you know that."

"I think she is talking about the wards," Padma said slowly. "They probably couldn't stop us, not with you as the root of the Paradox, but they could make the results...uncertain."

Luna nodded.

"So...London, magic," Katie said.

"Location," Padma added, "opportunity..."

"So who would you suggest? The Weasleys?" Katie asked.

"Funny, but no, can you imagine them in the middle of muggle London?"

"Bill, sure," Harry interjected, "Fred and George too, for that matter. Arthur... would be interesting."

"Interested in the muggles," Katie said. "No, we need a half-blood, someone with knowledge of both. Erica, maybe, she was in our house and your year."

Harry frowned, "Don't remember her, sorry."

Padma frowned slightly, "Parvati and she didn't really hang out, and Hermione was always with you and Ron. Um, Megan Jones in Hufflepuff was half, as were Susan Bones and Hannah, and Corner, Goldstein, and Lisa Turpin among the 'claws. Millie..."

"Can you see any of them visiting the muggle zoo in London?" Harry asked.

"Under the right circumstances," Padma allowed. "Katie, you know Hannah best from back then, do you think?"

"Probably not," Katie said. "I suppose I could go, but I was nearly as isolated as Harry was." She turned to Harry, "I know you were friends anyway, but what about Hermione?"

"We didn't really get along until after that thing with the troll," Harry said. "If that's the best we can do, we might as well try hooking up with Justin Finch-Fletchley. We weren't friends, but if we recognized each other on the train or before Sorting..."

"And if you missed either, would you prefer being put into Hufflepuff, even knowing that Ron's family has always been in Gryffindor?" Katie asked.

"Probably not," Harry admitted. He frowned suddenly, "Maybe we should just ignore the whole Hogwarts thing."

"What do you mean?" Padma asked.

"Well...what about a different school?" Harry asked. "Could we, I don't know, have the Melbourne Institute send me a letter, or Miskatonic U, or even Beauxbatons or Durmstrang?"

"Maybe," Katie said doubtfully.

"Do you really think Dumbledore would allow it?" Padma asked.

"Probably not," Katie said. "But even if he did, Harry, I'm not sure that you would go for it."

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"Because it wouldn't be you, who you are now, making the decision," Katie said. "If you were presented with two or three schools, which would you choose, the one where your parents and their friends went to, or one where they didn't go?"

Harry looked at her for a moment, then slowly nodded. "A point. Definitely a point. So we'd need a way to keep Albus from interfering until it was too late." He thought for a bit more, "It might be possible, might not as well. Let's see what else we can come up with.

"For starters, what about the muggle world? Allie lived more in it than she did the wizarding," Harry said. "The magic she was doing, it wasn't the kind that the Trace detected, especially not with all those wards she used. It would be easier to hide from Dumbledore than to conceal that I was going to a different school. Would having outside contacts like she did be an advantage?"

"Maybe in the short term," Padma said, "but not in the long term. I'll admit that in her area of specialty Allie is amazingly powerful. But you do remember how much trouble she has with even the most

basic of spells? Unless you apprentice yourself to someone like Dumbledore, you need Hogwarts or a similar school simply to learn the magic you'll need."

"Besides," Katie slowly smiled, "you remember all those rules Dumbledore let you get around? The broom and Quidditch team our first year. All the adventures you went on, that invisibility cloak, the points at the end of our first year. If Allie dragged you away from the Dursleys..."

"At the point I'd never really had a friend and she would pull me away to lecture me on doing magic so publicly...probably would at any rate," Harry mused. "At the very least she would introduce me to magic, and living in the muggle world or not she did have a lot of ties to the magical world back then, even if we didn't know it. Add in what she has now..."

"I take your point, Padma, but I could probably find a tutor for the wand-based magic if Albus wouldn't, er, won't accept her. I could put out adverts..."

"Professor Lupin would probably find them, and I may not have known her well but you know how my father and Allie were," Padma said. "No problem there. And if Dumbledore gives in..."

"Then I've already met Allie a good eight or nine years before I otherwise would and she gets to go to Hogwarts," Harry finished. "Is that worth what she would otherwise learn outside of Hogwarts?"

Padma shrugged, "her ability is innate, Harry. The things she's had to learn to control it, she would have to learn regardless. In that regards it doesn't matter if she has a tutor or goes to Hogwarts, assuming Dumbledore let her. The real questions are whether having her at Hogwarts will constitute a large enough change to be effective, and whether or not having her in the reptile house on that day is even possible."

"I will have to check the date, but otherwise, yes," Luna said, her normal vague expression absent.

"So how am I going to die?" Harry asked.

"You are going to kill yourself," Luna said.

"So you've said," Harry said. "How am I going to kill myself? The Prophecy says 'at the hand of the other'. Do I need to find a way to cut off Voldemort's right hand and strangle myself with it, or do I need to cut out my heart or something?"

"Nothing so extreme," Padma said. "The Prophecy gives both you and Voldemort a serious protection against everyone except each other. It also gives both of you the ability to pierce it. Since you can kill Voldemort, you are also able to pierce the protections on yourself. Since Voldemort is not killing you, but you are still being killed, a prophetic paradox will go into effect."

"Which will destroy creation if left alone," Harry said.

"Actually, we aren't certain how it'd resolve on its own," Padma said. "My belief is that it would only go back to the point you were marked, Hermione thinks it would go to the point you were born, and Luna believes it would go back to when the Prophecy was first delivered.

"The point is, Luna, along with Hermione and myself, can use it to generate a minute amount of anti-time that will allow us to make our influence on the past, and clear away the future from the point the paradox de-stabilizes to be re-written."

This principle I've kept in mind in all that I have tried:
It isn't how much force you use; it's how it is applied!

Arlene Hills and Catherine Faber
Inspired by Vorkosigan saga by Lois McMaster Bujold

Safe House- Strawgoh

Location: CLASSIFIED-TOP SECRET

December 22, 2021—22:13:42-zulu

6,365 days since beginning of the Second Voldemort War

4,799 days after Disclosure.

"How much longer?" Harry asked.

"Seven minutes, thirty seconds...mark," Padma said, glancing briefly at her watch before turning back to the scroll she was reading

"You know, most people wouldn't be so eager to kill themselves," Katie said.

"It's not that," Harry said with a shake of his head. "It's just that I'm cold."

"We can tell," Padma said.

Katie glared at her.

"Stop fidgeting or you will smear the runes we've carefully painted on you," Luna said, oblivious to the byplay as Hermione stifled a giggle.

"Stop ogling my boyfriend," Katie said.

"Make me," Padma said absently, not looking away from the scroll in her hands that she had been intently pouring over since before the runes were even dry.

"So can one of you explain why the timing on this needs to be so precise?"

"The date is significant in that it is mid-way between the last full moon of the year and the last half-moon of the year," Padma said.

"Waning gibbous," Hermione said.

"Also it's the day after the solstice," Padma continued.

"Wouldn't doing it the day of have been better?" Harry asked.

"Very good," Hermione said. "You were paying attention."

"Guessed, actually," Harry admitted. "But I've done enough more than enough High Ritual magic to know that certain days have power, so it made sense." He paused a beat, then asked again, "So why are we doing it the day after?"

"The numbers align better," Padma said.

"Don't you mean the planets or stars align better?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione said testily. "Stop worrying, this will work."

"I'm not worried at all," Harry said.

Katie looked at him, "Harry, I've been around every big feat of magic you've done in the past decade. If one thing has held constant, you always worry."

"He was like that in school too," Hermione said.

Harry shrugged, "Look, Katie, there are four ways this is going to work out. I'm going to kill myself, and Hermione, Luna, and Padma will either make this thing work or they don't. There are only so many ways this plays out. One," he said, ticking off a finger, "they're right about the paradox, but can't stabilize it long enough to effect a change, then everyone is dead. That's not exactly the best outcome, but probably better than having to live under Voldemort and his Death Munchers."

Katie cracked a weak smile.

"Two, they're right about the paradox, and are able to stabilize it long enough and effect a change that's different enough that the temporal shockwave doesn't destroy the new time-line. If it they do...then nothing I've done since before I went to Hogwarts will have

ever happened. Ginny, the twins, Dumbledore, Minnie, 'Vati, the Lupins, everyone, will still be alive.

"Three, they're wrong about their interpretation of the Prophecy in which case I won't be able to kill myself."

"And four?" Katie asked.

"He can kill himself, but it satisfies the prophecy and doesn't invoke paradox," a voice said from the stairs.

All five people turned to look as another woman, dressed in flowing black robes that swirled around her so that it looked like she was dressed in spun shadows, strode down the stairs. A second witch, in much plainer but more colorful robes was right behind her. Behind them came a third figure, gliding along above the floor. The dementor that served the first witch as familiar, servant, and minion wore a white version of normal dementor robes, but they were so heavily covered with tiny, black, constantly-flowing runes that they appeared gray. One of the many side effects of those robes, besides repelling patroni and a large assortment of other spells, was that all those who didn't bear the Dark Mark were unaffected by the dementor's normal aura of despair.

"Your Majesty," Luna said with a deep bow towards the second witch. "Lady of Thornes," she continued to the witch dressed in black, "Mistress of the—"

"Yes, yes," the first witch said. "I know who I am, no need to make a production out of it." Shadows seemed to reach out and touch her as she walked into the basement that was now lit with the harsh glare of unshielded lights. She favored her left leg, leaning heavily on a thick blackthorn staff that was liberally etched with runes into which molten silver had been poured.

Her companion smiled, but it was a weak, wane smile that was a far cry from the bright and bubbly young witch Harry remembered first meeting at Hogwarts. He made a bow of his own but she waved it off. "Enough of that, Harry. If I had wanted bowing and scraping I would have visited Percy."

Harry winced. Percy had changed just as much as the rest of them had, but in many ways he was still the same. While he'd proven

himself capable on a battlefield, he was a genius on par with Albus when it came to administration and logistics and everything that needed organizing. He was, in fact, the only person who knew all of their safe-houses, all of their supply caches, how many people they could throw into a fight at any one time, and who most of their suppliers and spies in Voldemort's organization were. In many ways he was more important than Harry himself and King Henry IX combined, and he was the only person whose personal security exceeded that of the King. The stress would have killed most people, in fact Harry was pretty sure it had killed him and that Percy had merely put off dying until Voldemort was dead, but it hadn't stopped him. However, the stress, or maybe just a need to remember better times, had made Percy even more...Percyish than Harry had believed was possible.

"Hannah," Harry said in greeting, then he nodded towards the witch in black. "Allie."

Hannah shot him a cool look, her eyes widening slightly as she took in his rune-covered body. After a moment she shook her head and gave a very unlady-like snort of laughter before offering him a wan smile.

"Harry," the witch in black responded, her voice dull and distant. When they'd first met it'd have been warm, and her lips would have been quirked in an amused smirk. For years it seemed like her only expression was a smirk, but like so much it had simply disappeared one day and had never returned since.

When they had first met he'd thought her the most physically beautiful woman he would ever meet. However, the hideous powers she controlled had left her skin sallow where it wasn't marred by burst blood vessels, her cheeks and eyes had sunken, the skin of her face seemed to hang from her bones it was so wrinkled, and despite the best freshening charms a vague odor of rot hung about her. In spite of the ravages that those magics had inflicted upon her physical body, she remained one of the five most powerful spell-casters he had ever met. In fact, she was arguably one of the three most powerful, eclipsing even Albus Dumbledore for she had mastered a trick only Voldemort and Harry himself had.

"You," Hermione grimaced as though she'd just smelled something unpleasant.

"Granger," Allie returned.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione demanded.

"Who did you think you were going to get to influence my past self?" Allie asked.

"We've satisfied the power requirements and—"

"It isn't about power, Granger, haven't you figured that out yet?" Allie asked. "It's not about the magic you use, but how you apply it. It's not enough to simply make contact, you also have to get my past self to do as you plan. Even if you do throw enough power back to batter down the defenses I had in place, which you can probably do given that you'll have a contained, at least temporarily—you should pardon the term—paradox to draw on, what makes you think that I will do it? I was perfectly capable of fighting off the Imperious curse even then, and at least partially resistant, if not out-right immune, to most other forms of magical persuasion. You aren't going to be able to give me a potion or possess me, and you certainly aren't going to be able to slap a geas on me which would otherwise probably be your best bet.

"You need my past self to want to do as you wish. Now why would she do that?"

Hermione didn't reply.

"Can we do this?" Harry asked.

"Probably," Allie allowed. "To the best of my knowledge this has never been attempted before and succeeded. Of course," she said thoughtfully, "I suppose it would defeat the purpose of attempting this if there were records of someone having attempted this." She looked around the room and sighed, "We're a long way from Paris, aren't we, Harry?"

Harry managed not to wince at the memory of standing on the observation platform of the Eiffel Tower with this same woman as zombies poured out of the ground, having been raised from the world-famous catacombs and then used the only slightly less-famous mines to spread throughout the city unseen, as even more

of the undead rose from the centuries-old cemeteries surrounding the city. "An even longer way from Dresden," he added, mentioning the city they had watched burn to ashes from summoned fiendfyre.

Neither of the cities had been destroyed by Voldemort or his allies.

Allie nodded in agreement as a low-pitched bell began to toll.

"The perimeter ward has been breached," Luna noted calmly.

"Abort?" Harry asked. "Can we get Hannah out?"

"Not enough time," Allie said instantly. She was staring away from them, in the direction of the southern wall where it met the ceiling, but Harry well knew that she wasn't looking at anything of the purely physical world. "I could, perhaps, duplicate this set up, but another advantageous alignment will not occur soon enough for us to utilize."

"You didn't answer my question," Harry snapped. "Can we get—"

"The Dark Lord is coming," Allie said flatly. "If you plan to do this it must be now and Hannah is the only person present capable of standing in for Earth. Katie, what element are you standing for?"

"Water," Katie said.

Allie frowned as another alarm started to shriek.

"I know, I answer to Fire and, to a lesser extent, Air better than I do water," the former Chaser said. "But—"

"We already have Granger and Padma for Fire and Air, and Luna for Spirit," Allie cut her off. "I will take Water. Your presence is unnecessary. Go. See to our defenses. Bob, go upstairs, kill any Death Eater that tries to disturb us."

"We still have time to do this," Harry said as the dementor bowed low to its mistress, then turned and glided silently up the stairs. "We can get Hannah out, reorganize—"

"This ends tonight," it wasn't Allie who cut him off this time. Harry turned to find Hannah looking at him. "One way or another, Harry."

"Hannah, I—"

"Shut up," she said. "The Harry I knew in Hogwarts would be horrified of the person he'd become if he had a chance to meet you. There isn't time for me to say all the things I want to, so just shut up and let's get this thing finished."

"I—"

"Harry," Katie said gently.

"Can't I say anything?" Harry asked.

"No, she's right, there's no time," Katie said. She turned and headed for the stairs.

"Katie!" Harry called.

She stopped and turned.

"I—" he began, but the words caught in his throat. The simple declaration he hadn't been able to make since Ginny's death and the rampage he had gone on after, turned to ash on his tongue.

"I know," she said quickly. Then she was gone.

"Quickly, into the circle," Allie said.

Almost immediately the wards stopped screaming.

"Now."

Harry ran to the silver-inlaid circle and tried to ignore the sounds of fighting upstairs as the five witches chanted. They managed to finish enclosing them in a circle of shimmering magic that hung around the six of them like a curtain of hot air before the sounds of fighting stopped.

"How much longer?"

"Too long if you distract us," Hermione bit out. "We really should have practiced this part—"

"Granger?" Allie asked politely. "Shut up, please."

Harry nodded as the door that led to the stairs shuddered in its frame. Dust drifted down from the rafters as the sounds of fighting lessened. The door shuddered again, then disappeared into a cloud of splinters that buzzed across the room. Those that struck the outer circle flashed into fire as the penetrated and vanished into tiny puffs of ash as they passed through the circle.

A tall man with broad shoulders walked into the room, wand raised. "Hello, Harry."

Harry felt something cold congeal in the pit of his stomach. "Dean," he said.

"Still trying to escape the inevitable?" Dean asked.

"The dementor didn't even try to stop you," Allie noted coolly before Harry could reply.

Dean grinned at her and lifted his arms so that the sleeves of his robe slid down. He twisted his arms back and forth. "The Master didn't Mark all of His servants. He knew that there were times when it would be ill-advised for one of His to display his or her allegiance so openly."

He turned back to Harry. "Whatever it is you're trying to do, Potter, it won't work. You are going to die down here."

"I know," Harry said softly. His lips quirked into what might have almost been a smile, "That is sort of the idea, after all."

Dean frowned at him. "I always thought you were smart, Potter. Only when my Father revealed that you had refused His offer to join him did I realize how foolish you were."

"Your father?" Harry asked, feeling rather confused by the sudden turn the conversation had taken.

"Yes, Potter, my Father. Lord Voldemort revealed Himself, and apologized for getting me upon a disgusting muggle."

Allie laughed. "You poor ignorant fool."

Dean paused and looked at her.

"Your real father's name was Darrel Thorneberry, and he left the woman he loved to protect her when he refused to follow your petty little necromancer."

"You are lying," Dean said.

"Do you think I can't tell whether or not another person is a Thorne, even if only distantly?"

Dean paled. His skin was so dark it left him looking sort of grey, Harry thought. "Y-You're lying," he repeated.

"I don't lie, Cousin, not about things like this," Allie said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Dean asked.

"Because you never did ask," Allie said with mock sorrow. "Do you know what happens when a thorn crosses the Thorne?"

"Should I be frightened?" Dean asked, suddenly grinning. "You're inside of a magic circle, hag, you can't touch me without bringing it down."

"Perhaps," Allie allowed, "And then perhaps not. Are you really so certain?"

Dean hesitated.

"Allie," Hannah said. "As facinating as your reunion is, we don't have time for it."

"Oh very well," Allie said. "Bob."

"Bob?" Dean asked as the grayish-white-clad dementor ghosted down the stairs behind him. He snorted. "What kind of spell uses the incantation 'bob'?"

"Who said it was an incantation?"

Harry watched as instead of grasping Dean to perform its soul-eating kiss, the Dementor plunged its hands into Dean's back. The dark-skinned man Harry had once shared a dorm with instantly dropped his wand and began shrieking as the Dementor grasped inside his body and pulled.

A swirl of black smoke flowed down the stairwell and congealed into the form of Lord Voldemort.

"Harry, Harry," he said, not sparing his servant a glance as the dementor ripped into him. "Voldemort confesses his disappointment. Leaving your friends to die upstairs like that while you cower down here, what would Albus think of you?"

Dean let out a particularly hideous shriek before collapsing to the floor as the dementor pulled its hands out of his body. There was no blood, in fact there was not even a trace of a wound on the man's body, but in its hands the dementor cradled a ghostly, writhing, man-shaped figure of roiling energy.

Despite the horrors of the war, the armies of zombies, the radioactive wastelands of Miami and Edinburgh, the Fiend-Fyre of Dresden, the undead swarming in Paris, London, the hellgate that he had opened in Dublin in an attempt to defeat Voldemort once and for all and the...things that had crawled out of it. Berlin, Rome, Vienna, Brussels, Riga, Liverpool... Works of the darkest of magics wrought as often by himself and his allies as they were by Voldemort and his... The dementor cradling his former friend's soul was one of the most terrible things Harry had seen.

Voldemort just peered at the dementor as though it were a dog that had just performed a particularly interesting trick.

"Can it put the soul back in the boy's body?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes," Allie said tersely.

Harry wondered briefly just how she knew that. Then he recalled her previous offer to handle interrogations of captured Death Eaters and those wizards and witches loyal to Voldemort and for the first time in what was a very long time, felt ill. In contrast it was almost amusing to see the Dark Lord refer to Dean as 'the boy', considering the

number of years and the number of bodies each had left scattered in their wake.

"Do so and Voldemort will be merciful," Voldemort said. "The boy has done Voldemort some service and He always gives just rewards to those who have pleased Him and served Him faithfully."

"Did anyone ever tell you that the whole talking about yourself in the third-person is really annoying?" Harry asked. Before Voldemort could respond he added, "Allie."

Allie didn't have to say anything. The soul in Bob's scabrous hands made sounds no human ear should hear as it was ripped apart by the dementor.

"A pity," Voldemort said as he watched the destruction of the soul of one of his most useful minions. Bob couldn't help but break off a choice part and pop it into its lamprey-like maw, but otherwise it tore at the soul until it dispersed and disappeared. The Dark Lord waited until the dementor was finished, then touched the demon's robes with a single, long, spidery finger and uttered a Word that made the world twist in on itself.

It was Bob's turn to shriek as the robe coiled and twisted around it, spinning tighter and tighter and smaller and smaller until, with a tiny 'pop', it disappeared.

Voldemort drew a long knife with a silver blade and heavily jeweled handle, and plunged it into Dean's chest. After a moment he straightened, leaving the knife in Dean's body, and peered down at the runes inscribed into the floor and walls around the magic circle. "Consorting with demon-callers, seeking beyond the Outer Gates, attempting to go against the currents of Time itself! Dear me, Harry, have you become so very desperate? Whatever would poor Albus think of you now?"

"Can't say," Harry said with a shrug, "What with you having your servant kill him and all."

"Ask him when you see him next," Voldemort said raising his wand. "Perhaps I shall call your body and use it to ask you. That is, after all, what the true purpose of Necromancy is, and I am the greatest Necromancer alive."

"Please, I'm not a bad corpse-raiser myself," Harry said. "But if it makes you feel better," he added as Hermione stepped back slightly and nodded shortly to him, "I'll try to remember and ask him if I get the chance."

"Come, Harry. It's too late for whatever ritual you were planning to do. Let us duel and end this petty conflict once and for all," Voldemort said.

"Petty conflict?" Harry repeated. "You cannot be serious."

Voldemort grinned. It was an ugly, gut-twisting sight and behind him Harry could hear Luna whimper. "As I recall, Bellatrix killed Sirius."

Harry gapped at his arch-nemesis. "Did you just...did you just make a serious/Sirius joke? I think you did. You made a joke. The world really is coming to an end."

"Your imminent demise has made me maudlin," Lord Voldemort said, dropping out of the third-person references. "Are you quite prepared to die now, Harry?"

"Certainly," Harry said, making a sarcastic bow. "May I say something first?"

"Lord Voldemort is generous, Harry," Voldemort told him, gesturing with his wand in a similar manner as what Professor McGonagall used to wave her finger while lecturing a particularly tricky piece of transfiguration. "He will grant you your last request of a short speech before your death. It will not matter overmuch, as only Lord Voldemort will live to remember it."

"I'll be short," Harry promised. "Two words, actually." He raised his wand. "Avada Kedavra."

A blinding flash of green light forced everyone in the room to look away as Harry Potter, the Chosen One, crumpled to the floor.

And the seventh angel poured forth his bowl into the air;
and a voice cried out: "It is done!"

Revelations 16:17

I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds.

J. Robert Oppenheimer, quoting the Bhagavad Gita
Shortly after Trinity, site of the world's first nuclear detonation

Now we are all sons of bitches

Kenneth Bainbridge's response to Oppenheimer

Safe House- Strawgoh

Location: CLASSIFIED-TOP SECRET

December 22, 2021—23:57:35-zulu

6,365 days since beginning of the Second Voldemort War

4,799 days after Disclosure.

"Lord Voldemort admits himself...disappointed," Voldemort said, staring at the body of his mortal enemy. He turned his attention to the glowing sphere of blue-green energy hovering at waist-height over the body of Harry Potter. "What is this?"

"A destabilizing Paradox that's going to destroy this world," Allie said.

Hermione turned to her and started to say something, only to shriek as she burst into flames.

Voldemort turned his wand on Luna next and struck her down just as quickly before turning to Hannah.

The former Hufflepuff, and lately Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, dodged the killing curse and blocked the same fire spell that had immolated Hermione a second before. She threw a reductor curse at the ground in front of Voldemort's feet and used the ensuing dust that filled the room to hide the stream of curses that Padma sent at Voldemort.

"Avada Kedavra."

The flash of green light took Hannah from behind and Padma swore violently as she dodged to put the sphere of temporal energy between herself and both opponents.

"You, you were working for him the whole time?" she demanded.

"Not the whole time, no," Allie told her coolly.

Padma spared Voldemort a quick glance to keep the Paradox between him and her. "Why?" she asked.

"Padma, you of all people would be the last to understand," Allie said. "I will not attempt to justify myself for you because, frankly, it does not matter and we haven't the time for it even if it did."

"What is this magic?" Voldemort demanded.

"An unstable temporal paradox," Allie repeated, eyeing the sphere of energy. "Interesting. Three deaths have stabilized it...somewhat."

"Oh, so we have time for your magical studies?" Padma demanded.

"No," Allie said.

"It's purpose?" Voldemort inquired.

"They used it to influence the past," Allie said, slowly advancing around the circle towards Padma.

"I should have known better than to trust you," Padma hissed backing away.

"Funnily enough, this may grant us all exactly what we wish," the other woman said.

"You won't have Harry. No matter what you change, I won't allow it."

"I was never interested in him that way," Allie demurred. "Goodbye, Padma."

Padma raised her wand to block Allie's curse, but she had retreated too far and she collapsed lifelessly to the ground as Voldemort's killing curse took her in the back.

The Dark Lord strode forward and pressed his hand to the invisible circle of magic.

"Let me through the barrier," Voldemort hissed.

"Too late for that," Allie said, turning back towards the sphere of energy. "We've put four deaths into it. Magic will get through, but neither you nor I can breach that circle before the Paradox unravels Time. They have cast their changes into the Void Between Words, into the aether that is All, far beyond the reach of mortal flesh and bone to recall. Still, they had their chance but I have not yet wrought my own work."

She stared at the orb of multi-hued, rapidly swirling energy.

A moment later she nodded. "There. It is done. I wish there were a way of taking back a copy of our history, it would be interesting to see how the new timeline pla

"Call."

Chips were moved to the center of the table. One of the two trios of women who were sitting clustered together, cackled as the final wager was matched. One of them started to reveal their cards only for said cards to vanish. This was followed by the rest of the cards still held, or set in front of the players who had folded. The deck set on top of a chained book in front of the dealer grew as lost cards were returned to it. No sooner had the last card returned to it than the deck began to shuffle itself.

"Do you have room for one more at this table?"

"You're late, Char," said the other person who had still been in the round.

"And you cost us an eye," added one of the trio, "literally."

"You did not lose anything, you merely failed to gain something you desired," replied the newcomer who was wrapped up in a heavy boat-cloak, a hood concealed his features aside from a long grey beard. "In any case, our friend was about to lay claim to the tooth you had just wagered. You should thank me." He nodded to a

woman with raven hair and pale skin that was tattooed around one eye.

"Do you have something of Value to offer?" asked a member of the second of the two triads sitting at the table.

"I do."

A splayed out hand hovered over the table, only the fingertips touching. A small silver coin fell out of his voluminous sleeve and rolled along on its edge until it reached the center of the poker table where it began to rapidly spin.

Faster and faster it spun until with a crack it split in half. Two silver disks rose into the air, one displaying a lightning bolt, the other, two roman letters, HP. An image flickered into existence above them. A man with unkempt hair, dark eyes, and pale skin, a lightning-bolt shaped scar marred his brow.

"Impossible."

Five voices uttered the word at the same time. The first was the tattooed woman. The second through fourth were the second triad of women. The last was the Dealer who was now looking accusingly at the first woman.

"I didn't appear to him," she said. "Harry can't be dead."

"We did not finish weaving his story into the Tapestry," said one of the women. "What does your Book say, Des—"

"No names," this from a large, bare-chested man who wore bronze vambrances on his arms. He nodded to the dealer. "As they say, consult your Tome, Dealer."

The injunction was unnecessary. Already the Chained Book lay open before the Dealer who was rapidly flipping through the pages. "It was written, EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER."

The Book slammed shut with a thump that echoed in the room.

"As it was written," the Dealer said, "So shall it be."

"He didn't die," the woman repeated. "The Prophecy went unfulfilled."

"I ferry the dead across the river Styx," returned the boatman. "He was no living hero come to my realm like in the sagas of old. That a dead-man came to me without dying is a—"

"Paradox," spat one of the weavers from where the trio was consulting the end of an elaborate tapestry. "See? Already the Tapestry begins to unravel."

"The one who gave me that coin, also carried these." Several pieces of a silver coin were scattered on the table, along with four tiny bronze coins stamped with alchemical symbols for fire, air, earth, and spirit. A solitary copper coin, only slightly larger than the bronze ones, was stamped with the symbol of water.

He was greeted with silence.

"You have a proposal, Ferryman?" asked the Dealer.

A wave of the boatman's hand and the spilled coinage turned into a pile of chips. A second wave conjured a chair. "Reshuffle the deck, Dealer, and let us play the game again."

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